



Circular Economies for Environmental Justice

Advancing Equitable Policies



Fresh Kills landfill (before clean up), Staten Island, NY, 2001

Support for a circular economy is essential for improving environmental justice in the United States. But while a circular economy is important, there is no guarantee that a circular economy will decrease disparities and support healthy and equitable communities unless we fight for equity in circular economy approaches.

Across the United States, communities filled with close knit relationships and hard working people experience the devastating effects of environmental injustice. Environmental injustice affects many Black, Brown, Native, rural, and low-income communities. Our current economic system produces vast amounts of waste, toxic contaminants, air pollution, and water pollution. Environmental injustice describes the fact that these dangers – from toxic waste sites, landfills, incinerators, feedlots, oil extraction sites, refineries, highways, and more – are disproportionately located in neighborhoods where Black, Brown, indigenous and low-income people live.¹

A circular economic system focuses on minimizing the extraction of resources and the generation of waste and pollution, creating loops that keep resources and products in use. We can't meet our environmental justice goals without moving toward a circular economy – but equity will be slow coming if we implement circular economic policies that don't address racial and class justice head on.

What Is a Circular Economy?

A circular economy is an economic system in which products and processes are designed so materials and products stay in use and maintain their value, minimizing resource use and waste and letting natural systems thrive.

Circular Economic Practices Advance Environmental Justice

Environmental injustice occurs because of actions – conscious and unconscious – that undervalue the lives and well-being of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and low-income communities. Making a difference requires addressing this racism and bias head on, and also requires reducing the overall production of poisons and waste so that no one's home becomes a toxic zone. Circular economic practices work to address the production of waste and pollution at their roots. A circular economy provides a systematic framework for changing our economic system to reduce the generation of pollutants and toxins.

Moving toward a circular economy requires change by businesses, individuals, and different levels of government. Local governments can start by adopting circular economy resolutions, which commit the city or town to taking steps to start implementing a circular economy. Adopting a circular economy resolution can jumpstart a local government's journey to reduce the waste, toxic contaminants, and climate emissions that endanger residents and the future.



Environmental Justice Matters Because Lives Are at Stake

- More than half of people who lived within 2 miles of toxic waste facilities in the U.S. are people of color.²
- Particulate matter, which increases the risk of asthma, sudden infant syndrome, heart attacks, and premature death, imposes a 54% higher health burden on African-Americans and a 35% higher health burden on people in poverty compared to the overall population.³
- High levels of lead, which is toxic to children at any level and can cause diminished IQ and reduced attention span, are three times as common for Black children as White children.⁴
- Asthma, which is the leading cause of hospitalization and school absenteeism, affects more than twice as many Black children as White children.⁵
- People who are low-income, Black, and Latinx are disproportionately concentrated in high traffic areas, which are associated with childhood asthma, reduced lung function, development of autism, and negative effects on cardiovascular health and mortality.⁶

Advancing Equitable Circular Economic Approaches

Decades of experience show that when policies don't explicitly take race and class injustices into account, even well-intentioned efforts often end up maintaining or even worsening inequities.⁷ For example, some studies show that cap and trade in California reduced overall carbon emissions, but led to higher annual carbon and co-pollutant emissions in neighborhoods of color.⁸

Without a strong emphasis on equity, movement toward a circular economy may take longer to bring benefits to low-income communities and communities of color. Any transition imposes costs and uneven job gains and losses. Without investment and commitment to a just transition, low-income people and communities of color may experience more obstacles to retooling for new business or job opportunities.



Fresh Kills landfill (after clean up), Staten Island, NY, 2017

Racial and social justice demand an ongoing quest to adopt, learn from, and strengthen equitable circular economic policies. The Climate Equity Policy Center's [local circular economy resolution](#) advances equity and a circular economy by calling for an assessment of current environmental justice burdens in a community, identification of opportunities to reduce undue exposure to waste and pollution, creation of circular local business opportunities, and an exploration of circular job creation for local residents who are unemployed or underemployed. The resolution calls for the adoption of specific additional policies and programs to advance a circular economy, and equity must also be built into these approaches.

A circular economy will play a key role in improving environmental justice in the United States. By committing to policies that center equity in a circular economy, we can ensure that our future economic practices advance climate goals, justice, and healthy and equitable communities.



References

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